

FOUNDATIONS: Servanthood
Matthew 20:20-28 (AFBC 1/14/2018)

²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him. ²¹ "What is it you want?" he asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." ²² "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. ²³ Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." ²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— ²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

We come this morning to another basic belief among followers of Jesus, a foundational way of living for all who seek to be faithful to our Lord. I'm talking about the Christian lifestyle of servanthood.

Jesus was still trying to get this across to his disciples—and also to at least one of their mothers, it seems—when He says here that He had come among us as a servant and expected all who follow Him to live lives of service as well.

We're considering this foundational teaching of Jesus today because at the end of this service, we will ordain four new deacons. Servanthood—and many of us know this already--servanthood is at the heart of what it means to be a deacon.

The same can be said for Pastors, other Ministers, Sunday School teachers, and lay leaders of all kinds in the life of the church. If we carry out our responsibilities well, it's because we know what it means to serve others.

We may not always understand this as well as we should, though. If the first disciples of Jesus struggled with this—and they did—then it seems reasonable to think that we'll struggle with this too.

Consider this: how many different answers do you think we would get if we asked, “What are Deacons, and what are they supposed to do?” We’d likely get a variety of answers depending on our past experiences and the kinds of churches we’ve been part of.

Some would see Deacons as very godly individuals that the rest of the congregation should aspire to be more like—outstanding examples of Christian character.

Others might have a different perception of deacons—maybe even a negative perception--because, frankly, they know some deacons who haven’t behaved very well.

Most of us are familiar with a university founded by Baptists in North Carolina who call themselves “the Demon Deacons.” How did they come up with *that* name?

Well, it may be due to the fact that, in some places, Deacons rule the church. By the grace of God, I’ve never been called to serve in one of those churches. I’ve been told they can make a pastor’s life miserable—members’ too!

Now I hope this all seems foreign to you. It does to me. This has never been my experience with deacons. When I think of Deacons, I remember people like Joe Jones, Harry Taylor, Leland Stoddard, Bob Burriss, and others who’ve served as Life Deacons of this church and are now with the Lord.

These were servant-leaders who’ve left a good mark on the life and ministry of this church. Our new deacon chair, David Stoddard, is the son of one of our Life Deacons. That’s legacy, friends.

But not all deacons are created equal. One lady shared with me about a particularly stuffy old deacon that she had had a few run-ins with. After she finished the story, though, I had some questions about whether it was true.

Anyway, she told me the old deacon’s name was “Gestant.” “Gestant?” I asked. “I’ve never heard that name before.” “Well, that was his name,” she said, “and it fit, too--stuffy old Deacon-Gestant.” (Just passing along what she said...)

Even though they may occasionally malfunction—and all of us do at times—still, deacons are vital to this church’s life and ministry—and I promise you, we have lots of folks in this fine church who

understand that servanthood is foundational to Christian living, in general—and it's essential to being a good deacon.

Let's see what the Bible says about this. The Greek word for "deacon" is "diakonos." We find this word all through the New Testament, and it's usually translated simply as... "servant."

It's not primarily about a position in the church, but rather a commitment to servanthood within the family of faith. In church life, servanthood exists on three different levels.

1) First, we find in Scripture what we might call "General Servanthood." This is the calling and responsibility of every follower of Jesus Christ. We serve the Lord by serving His Church.

There are hundreds of Bible verses that include the word "diakonos" where it's translated simply as "servant." Here are a few examples:

1) At the marriage Jesus attended in Cana, we find this account: "His mother said to the *servants*, "Do whatever he tells you." (John 2:5) 2) And in John 12:2: "Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha *served*, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him."

3) In Luke 4:39, we find Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law. It says: "So Jesus bent over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and began to *wait* on them." Now, in each of these cases, the word "diakonos" is used to designate someone who either cooks or serves food and drink.

But the word also includes other kinds of service... for example: Romans 13:4--"For he is God's *servant* to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's *servant*, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

What kind of servant is this? Well, it could be a law enforcement officer or other persons who are in places of authority for the purpose of serving the public good.

Now look at what Jesus did with the word "diakonos": John 12:26 – "Whoever *serves* me must follow me; and where I am, my *servant* also will be. My Father will honor the one who *serves* me."

Every follower of Christ is a “deacon” in this sense of the word—and listen--we always need more servants in the church—more Christians who take seriously Christ’s call to servanthood.

Being a Christian is not a spectator sport! In recent days, many of us have watched some football—and there’s still more to come. A relatively small number of people play the game while millions of us watch them doing it. But that’s never been Christ’s model for His church. He wants all of us... in the game, so to speak.

On January first, of course, before we went home to watch those Bowl Games, our church hosted a community meal—and there were deacons everywhere! Some of those serving were ordained as Deacons—but we had lots of people “deaconing”—serving people whom Jesus might refer to as “the least of these.”

Jesus went so far as to tell us that when we served them, we were serving Him. We were His deacons, His servants!

2) Now let’s focus on a second category of servanthood, what we might refer to as “**Gifted Servanthood**”:

Here’s an example in **Romans 12:5-8**: “...so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is *serv*ing, let him *serve*; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.”

For some Christians, servanthood is a spiritual gift. It’s also called the gift of ministry or service or helps. These are not just “servants in general.” These folks are “gifted” to serve.

They may be leaders—but not always. These Christians love to serve, often behind the scenes, with no recognition for what they do. We all know these people--many of you are among them.

Here are some characteristics of “**Gifted Servanthood**”:

1. An awareness of practical needs: these folks see what needs to be done, and do it. They see those dirty dishes and wash them. Others walk past them and don’t notice. They see trash in the

parking lot and pick it up, while others may just complain about it.

2. A motivation to meet needs quickly: they don't procrastinate, or talk something to death. They just... get 'er done!

3. A disregard for personal weariness. Like the Eveready Bunny—they just keep on going and going and going...

4. A great desire to complete the job: others may want to leave early, but gifted servants will say, "Not yet. Just a couple more hours and we'll have this done!"

So, there are "general servants": all of us should qualify here. Then, there are "gifted servants": for whom service is actually a spiritual gift. In both cases, though, the Biblical word is diakonos.

3) But there's a third group of servants: "Deacons" with a capital "D," because of the office they hold in the church.

The first group of servants are called to serve in a general sense as followers of Christ and members of His Church. The second group has received special gifts for service—they are able to take this ministry to a higher level than the rest of us.

Then we get to the third group—capital "D" Deacons—officers of the church, yes—but the meaning of the word hasn't changed. "Diakonos" still means servant—but *these* servants are set apart—they're ordained--for special ministry within the Body of Christ.

Here's a question: should being "ordained" be thought of as a promotion in the life of the church—what do you think? In a sense, it is—the church chooses deacons and sets them apart for this task.

It's just that promotions here in church are different. Out in the world, a promotion means that you're *over* more people. But in the church, it means you're *under* more people. There're not more people around to serve *you*, but more people around for you to *serve*. This is how it works when you get promoted in church.

Deacons are not a power group, but a servant group--assisting the church's Pastor and Staff, who are also "set apart" as servants in the life of the church. At their best, they are models of Christian servanthood that other Christians can look up to and learn from.

God is big on this concept of being an example to others. Parents

are to teach their children... by example. Older women in the church are told to teach younger women... by their example.

Paul told Timothy to be an example to the flock. People have been won to Christ because of persons who serve as living examples of lives that have been changed by the grace of God in Christ!

More spiritual truths are caught... than taught! Capital "D" Deacons are examples--model servants for the rest of the church. This is why the Bible's qualifications for Deacons are so high!

We should be able to look at our deacons and say, "Oh--that's how it's supposed to be done!" For example, if the deacon is a Sunday School teacher, he or she should be a "model" S.S. teacher--not necessarily in terms of talent, but in character, faithfulness, and commitment to the task!

Likewise, if a Deacon is in the choir, other choir members should say, "That's what it means to be a good choir member!"

Family life is another area in which Deacons are told to set a good example. If their own houses are not in order, how can they serve, and manage, and lead... in the Lord's House?

We are privileged to be ordaining four new Deacons in our church today. I encourage them, along with all our Deacons, to set the right example—in family life, professional life, and spiritual life.

You're not called to be perfect—Jesus Christ takes care of that--but you are called to set the right example: to be good servants, exemplary in every area of personal and practical life!

It's a high calling—and a sobering responsibility. This is why we ordain you—laying hands on you, praying for you, and reminding you that you're not doing this under your own power, but by the Spirit and through the strength of the Lord Christ Jesus... who is in you. May God richly bless each one of you as you serve among us.

As we sing our hymn of invitation now, I invite all of us to consider what "Christian servanthood" means in *our* lives. And whatever it is, let's commit ourselves to giving it our best—for the glory of God and for the faithful witness and ministry of His church.